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THE CHANGING ESKIMO

Paper Delivered
by

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A growing public awareness of the Eskimo has naturally enough led to a good deal of over-simplification in the popular mind. To many, the Eskimo is still the noble savage, and a very substantial emotional investment has been made in this quaint creature surrounded by snow-houses, sleds, fishing spears and cliches. In this confusing mid-twentieth society of inter-planetary travel, deliquent youth and subliminal perception, the Eskimo has become something of an unchanging value, the embodiment, if distant and unseen, of unchanging values. He is, to quote the most dreadful phrase of all, "unspoiled", and those associated with the contact between our southern and northern civilizations are equated with the forces of mammon.

This view, so long held, is not confined to any small lunatic fringe. It accounts for the extraordinary popularity of that long series of books of the "I Lived in an Igloo" School. It has been fundamental,

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at least until recently, in two of the three main elements operating in the north - - commerce and religion. And it certainly strongly influenced the third element - - administration - - until a very few years ago.

The twin fallacies of the "deep-freeze" approach are that the Eskimos can be insulated from change now, and that the Eskimos have remained unchanged since we have known them. The accounts of Lyon, which have been the foundation of so much of the popular picture of Eskimo life, were, however charming and accurate within their limits, revealing of only part of the story.

Eskimo life began to feel external forces when Frobisher in 1576 made his unhappy contact. For at least 300 years the contact was sporadic enough to leave few permanent imprints. This much of a pattern was set: no one in his right mind would question that the Eskimos were a lesser breed without the law, whose only role in any contact was to serve the interests of the colonizers. That attitude has never seriously been questioned until now. Climate and transportation left the Eskimos relatively undisturbed, while the white man's burden was reluctantly shouldered in richer corners of empire. But by the late nineteenth century commerce had come in the form of whalers and fur traders. The Eskimo's life changed, particularly through the activities of the latter. They were the first permanent Arctic residents come from the outside world, and they changed the natural economy with the introduction of the trap-line and an appetite for store-goods. This represented a sharp change in Eskimo life, but it was spread over many years in scattered places.

The missionary's influence, even if less capable of measurement, was nonetheless marked and permanent. Ancient beliefs, outlooks and even social relationships were replaced by new European codes, sometimes confusingly applied. There is no point trying to judge whether these changes were for better or for the worse. They were changes, and they were irretrievable. Most serious students would conclude that the changes wrought by commerce and religion were in some measure good, in some measure not good. Nearly all the influences were unconscious, in the sense that those involved little realized the implications of what they were so confidently doing to change the life of a people.

Perhaps all we can safely say about the present changes is that, even now, their effect in some measure is good, in some measure not good. Now, however, there is some appreciation of the total picture and, even though the problems of the Arctic are a good deal more complex now than during the entry of the first Europeans, we now have the benefit of a good deal of experience in relations with native peoples and considerable resources to meet their problems.

To summarize the nature of present change, let us divide the Eskimos into five general groups.

1. The relatively primitive groups in inland Keewatin, who are nearest to a natural economy, who have least regular contact with non-Eskimos, who are largely dependent for food upon land animals.
2. The coastal Eskimos, scattered throughout the Arctic,

but notably in Baffin Island and on the central and western Arctic coasts, who hunt and trap and who so far have been insulated from all but the most casual wage employment.

3. The Eskimos in proximity to sources of wage employment, who straddle two worlds, with sufficiently long periods of wage employment to affect their outlooks, yet still anchored to hunting and trapping.
4. Eskimos in permanent wage employment.
5. Eskimos who have left the Arctic for substantial periods.

The New Southerners

The fifth group is such a special class that it can be considered quite separately. Remarkably few Eskimos have decided to leave the Arctic and make their way in the south. Most of those down here are in hospital - - and they are 10% of the Eskimo population - - or are recently discharged from hospital and taking training preparatory to a new life - - but a new life in the north. Hospital life may leave physical or mental scars which it cannot cure. On either ground, or a combination of them, the Eskimo may be unable to return to the former life, particularly if it was a life on the land. This is a problem as old as hospital treatment, but it has been tackled within only the past two or three years.

The first answer starts back in the hospital. Eskimo patients were separated and often living alone amid an alien tongue and in an alien world: now they are grouped so that there is some sense of community,

some link with the past and expected future. Second, the isolation between patients and their homes or Eskimo society at large has been broken down by a series of administrative devices - - regular mail, photographs, tape recorded messages (all these a two-way traffic), and periodic visits by welfare staff speaking their language in the literal and figurative senses.

All this eases the transition back and helps create a positive attitude towards medical treatment amongst those who may live within the shadow of tuberculosis. It contributes to the absorption of southern customs and outlooks without the essential base being disturbed. It permits the new knowledge and outlooks to become part of a broad education instead of a mere source of confusion. There will still be those, however, who cannot return to their homes for the present, or forever. A few, who are so inclined, may be helped to find a suitable vocation in the south, but so far they are a tiny percentage of those who emerge with hospital cures. Others now have the opportunity to find a satisfying life in a rehabilitation centre, the first of which opened last autumn. The centre, placed in the burgeoning community of Frobisher Bay, will be the centre of a number of projects designed to give a sense of self-sufficiency, usefulness and independence - - projects like handicrafts, a bakery, a laundry, shops and a cinema.

The Barren Land Eskimos

One might think the likelihood of change would be least

amongst the group most independent of the white man, but here the crisis is deeper than anywhere else in the Arctic. The spectre is disappearing game, and this audience will be well aware of the disastrous decline in the caribou population. The total numbers, which as recently as seven years ago stood at 675,000, have dropped to about 200,000, and the future provides no grounds for optimism. The barrens, far from providing some improvement in a life punctuated by recurring starvation, disease and early death, can not support even the life of former times. The caribou situation has deteriorated too far to give hope to a scheme such as a short term of prohibited hunting during which food would be imported. Nor is a move to the sea a ready solution, for between the inland and coastal Eskimos lies a barrier in culture and economy not easily bridged. Any solution must rest upon ultimate, if not immediate, self-sufficiency and independence. At the moment there seems not a doubt in the world that the only avenue open is to reduce the pressure on local game resources. How this will be done is yet to be seen. It could happen if some inland people moved to the coast. It could happen if some of them moved out to accept wage employment. It could happen if additional income came from the land, from wage employment in local mining enterprises or a project such as commercial fishing.

The depth of the unsolved problem has been brought sharply home in the last two weeks in the case of the Henik Lake Eskimos. This is a group of only about 45 people -- less than a dozen families -- that symbolizes the depth of the dilemma faced by this group of Eskimos,

and by the non-Eskimos seeking to help them.

These people were originally a part of the Padleimuts, and about a generation ago they drifted off to the southwest, hunting in the general Nueltin-Ennedai Lake area just north of the Manitoba border. During the war a signal station established at Ennadai Lake became a focus for them, and became a confusing and troubled influence. Though it could give food out of ingenuous kindness, possibly alleviate sickness or at least report it, the station interfered unconsciously with the exploitation of the land. After the war a commercial fishery came to Nueltin Lake, but it did not prosper and the situation of the group continued to deteriorate. Two years ago the idea was suggested of moving back roughly to their old home, but nothing was done until the most thorough investigations had been made. A wildlife survey gave promise of better game returns. Advise was sought and freely given from many quarters and it was almost unanimous in favour of the move. Most important, the Eskimos concerned favoured it. Asking Eskimo opinion is a relatively new idea in the Arctic. In this case it was done by a number of experienced Arctic officers, perhaps the most important of whom was a government representative, part Eskimo, fluent in the language who had lived in this country all his life and was known intimately to the people.

The move took place last spring, with full support of all concerned. The same part-Eskimo government officer supervised the move and has lived with the people for considerable periods since. There has been food, but neither the improved economic situation nor the move

from the vicinity of the Signals Station to a new ground has brought a solution to a community suffering from a deep malaise, which ten days ago erupted into violence. Incidents, such as the shooting, are certainly not unknown in the Arctic, but we are not entitled to dismiss this as high spirits. What we are going to do, I do not know. We are going to move cautiously on the basis of all the information we can get and on the basis of long discussions with those more affected - - the Eskimos. This week two officers are flying in to join our field staff in the study. Significantly, these two officers represent half a lifetime of experience in the Arctic and high competence and wide experience in the profession of social worker.

The Hunter and Trapper

With certain exceptions, the coastal Eskimos have not suffered from a depletion of game comparable in any way to the disappearance of the caribou. Those whom, for this evening's purpose, we have put in this group have some contact with whites in that their life centres about the trading post, and occasionally the mission and the school, but they have not been swept into the new industries of the north. Why should these people now change?

We do not foresee for these people a cataclysmic change such as the new wage employees will encounter. But changes there will be, and for several reasons. First, the population is growing and there are few places where there is certainty that existing resources, as now used, are sufficient to sustain more people. Second, the present standards

of health and longevity cannot be accepted with equanimity. The life span of the hunting and trapping Eskimos does not, on the average, exceed thirty years. Tuberculosis, bronchial and other diseases are serious. Nothing but the most misguided sentimentality can permit these people to remain untouched by the benefits which modern public health, high nutritional standards, diversity in economic opportunity and education have brought to the country of which they are a part. Finally the welfare of these people is dangerously dependent on a one-crop economy, fur. The white fox is cyclical, and in the poor years relief becomes a socially damaging necessity. The future of the long hair furs may be better than the short hairs, now in stiff competition with synthetics, but in the long range it would be folly to depend upon a strong market for either.

The measures planned to assist these people are applicable to some extent to barren-land Eskimos and to those who supplement the product of the trap line with cash wages. There are four main directions of help: better use of renewable resources, cottage or local industries, better housing, better transportation. In the use of renewable food resources the first target is fish and sea mammals, not only to provide food for men and dogs but to use their products for fuel as an alternative to the white man's expensive stove oil, and to export the fish itself. Cottage industries may range from handicrafts, such as parka-making for an outside market to stone carving, if the artists concerned will forgive that art being classified as an industry. In some areas the collection of

down from the eider duck can ultimately provide a significant local industry.

In housing, the task is to find a simple, inexpensive, possibly portable, alternative to the unhealthy igloo. Perhaps the main emphasis is on "inexpensive", for if the only task to solve were technical, the job would soon be done. But we must find a type of housing that an Eskimo with a very low cash income can afford, and afford to maintain, with little or no dependence on the paternalism of the white man. This summer experiments are going forward on material as different as local rock and foam plastic panels.

Transportation is almost as important to the Eskimo economy as to the new industries of the Arctic. It costs fifty cents a mile to run a Peterhead, exclusive of any allowance for depreciation; we think that different engine and hull designs can reduce that cost below ten cents. Even though most new boats bought by Eskimos are stamped "Made in the Arctic", even the local boat building industry may not be the final answer on water transporation, if fibreglass should prove to be significantly more economical in operation. In land transportation, innovation in the western Arctic through the use of over-snow vehicles to visit traplines may in another generation become the pattern in much of the trapping country.

Finally, the life of these Eskimos may change through migration from over-exploited areas to new hunting grounds recommended on the basis of wild-life surveys. That started as an administrative project

four years ago with the moves from Port Harrison and Pond Inlet to the Queen Elizabeth Islands. The extent of such moves in the future depends upon much more than game. There are many answers we would like to get from the men who must make them about the future economic patterns of the north through the growth of mining, transportation and defence.

These new activities, and above all, mining, will be the greatest incentive to change. Now, therefore, we turn to the changes brought by wage employment, whether full time or roughly part-time.

So pressing have the attendant problems of wage employment become that sometimes it is necessary to regain arithmetic perspective. No more than one in seven adult males is in permanent wage employment and less than one in four counts his wages as a major source of livelihood each year. I need hardly say that these figures are at least as rough as the categories described.

What do they do? At first, they must be hewers of wood and drawers of ice, for 350 years of contact with the white man has left the Eskimo totally unfitted to compete in his civilization, even in the Arctic. The number of Eskimo adults outside the western Arctic, possessing basic English, is less than 8 %, and the number of them who can read, write and do simple arithmetic is less than 5%.

Training is therfore an urgent necessity. There is not time to overtake the years when the chances of an education were lost. Schools are multiplying, and they serve the adults in evening classes:

but their main emphasis must be placed on the next generation. Those now who have chosen to jump the gulf of time and civilization need shorter term emergency solutions. Apart from isolated vocational training courses for scattered Eskimos, the main instrument of immediate training has been the school established in Leduc about a year ago to give four months courses in vehicle maintenance and basic English. It has 92 graduates now working on the DEW Line, at salaries which begin at $200 a month and rise by stages to $450, as skills increase. The DEW Line was the first big single employer in the Arctic and the suddenness of its demands for full-time labour had an influence out of proportion to the number of northerners it hires. Experience at Rankin Inlet, a relatively small mine by likely Arctic standard, gives some indication of the future demand for Eskimo services. Its total labour force is about 100, of whom about 80 are, or shortly will be, Eskimos. One other mining enterprise is looking for an operation with twenty times that payroll, and these are just two out of nearly fifty companies holding some mining interests in the Arctic.

The course at Leduc, which will later be moved to Yellowknife, is just a small part of the change coming to these new wage earners. Leduc, quite apart from its classes, is education in itself in the manners, customs and standards of the distant southern fringe of the Eskimos' country. It can in itself provide a form of motivation so important to economic and social pioneers.

Wage earning means a whole new pattern of existence - permanent static housing, store foods, store clothes, new forms of recreation, new forms of cultural expression. The cultural expression may run to such heights as Elvis Presley and "Jailhouse Rock", but those who now shed tears at rocking Eskimos are often those who did not weep through the generation while Eskimo culture was being lost to respectable European patterns.

Does the entry into wage employment mean complete social assimilation? We don't think so, and we certainly do not wish to contribute to such an end. There is no point at all in trying "to protect" the Eskimos from these influences. That approach is sterile and negative. The goal is to permit the Eskimos to compete on an economic level, to gain their place and make their mark in every respect upon the civilization which has come to surround them. The people of Wales have preserved a strong cultural heritage, which has in recent times been revived and strengthened. The Scots have not only survived their own climate but have gone about the world spreading such barbaric cultural symbols as the bagpipe and the haggis. Technology may help the Eskimos regain what they have been losing. ~~for~~ Radio and the printed word can be a unifying and strengthening force to a people who have never had their own literature.

It is easy enough for us to use these generalizations about what is happening to the Eskimo wage earners, but to Jonassie Kokeak or Martha Pilussie the changes are immediate and troubling - at first.

Strangeness to regular hours of employment can encourage absenteeism, almost always a problem on first employment. But it is a waning problem, just as for the wife: smooth fluffy desserts your husband will bve became attainable with patience and a box of cake mix. The problems of labour discipline or banking or buying or housekeeping would be a good deal harder were there not sympathetic guidance from the Northern Service Officer, the social worker, the teacher or the interested amateur. In any event, the spirit of help is usually there and it is as well that not all paths be laid smooth by others.

But will change be a one-way street? Undoubtedly it is easier for the Eskimo to adapt to the problems of the job and a higher standard of living than to problems of the land and a lower standard of living. What happens when the jobs disappear?

We don't think that the jobs will disappear. We must use statistics with the utmost caution, but the figures which I am about to suggest are really only broad guesses. Let us say that in Canada's population of 11,500 Eskimos there are about 3,000 employable male adults. Less than 15% are now dependent upon wage employment, and it is difficult to foresee a situation when more than half the Eskimos will be job-seekers - - at least within our lifetime. We can hope that the land can permanently sustain a population of 1500, with their dependents, at a higher standard of living than the Eskimo has ever known. That leaves 1500 available for jobs. Of these, a few will be permanently absorbed into the southern labour market, and probably rather more

will enter professional or administrative occupations in the Arctic, or be self-employed there in the growing roster of Eskimo enterprises. Let us say conservatively that these pursuits will account for 300 more. That leaves 1200 available for manual work.

When we remember that the DEW Line and the first small mine will shortly absorb 200, the transportation industry of Frobisher Bay another 300, that one large Ungava mine may demand 500 more, and that, even if one-tenth of the mines now developing there come into production, there would probably be jobs for another 2,000 Eskimos, we can see that this is an employee's market in an extreme sense. Of course, mines may close, though in the Arctic particularly they will not likely do so in response to short term recessions. Universal peace might descend upon us and all defence installations be closed. The worst that we can see happen is dislocation, and movement from one centre of employment to another. The Eskimo will always have an advantage in his homeland over an equally qualified outside employee. The Eskimo employee, as we see it, will always be in a more favourable position than his fellow-citizen to the south through good times and bad.

Of course there is still a risk for the wage employee, a smaller risk, we think, than for the average southern wage employee, a smaller risk than for the land-based Eskimo dependent on fluctuating fur prices or cyclical game - - but still a risk. But it is not folly to suggest that this risk should be rejected, that Eskimos should be condemned to a land which we know cannot support them, condemned

to handouts whose long-term consequences need not be described? Finally, have we the right to deny the Eskimos - - or any other Canadian citizen - - the opportunity which emerges down his street?

The Changing People

We have never thought of the Eskimo as the man in the street - - that wonderful mythical hero who rises to his pedestal each election or slowly for the after-dinner speech. But the Eskimo man in the street is emerging gradually and carefully as a force. It is not a process to be hastened, for to reverse too quickly the legacy of three centuries might court the disaster of all form and no substance.

I should like to close by referring to perhaps the most important change of all in Eskimo life, one that is beginning to embrace Eskimos in all the groups which we delineated. We refer to it as the man in the igloo - - the idea that Eskimos can themselves form opinions on their future and be articulate about them. Unless we can restore the intellectual independence of the Eskimo, all else is lost.

The form that this new articulation takes is the Eskimo Council, and interestingly enough the first successful experiment in this direction was amongst the hunting and trapping Eskimos of the Baker Lake area, but it also happening in centres of wage employment. The Eskimos of Baker Lake meet once a month, with all males over sixteen present. They have a rotating chairmanship and a secretary to keep records - - this much is borrowed from our institutions. The Northern Service

Officer is usually invited to attend as observer. The order of business may cover such subjects as a malformation noted on certain caribou and its meaning, new methods of making fish gaffs, the disposition of certain welfare cases, and news from outlying camps. The Northern Service Officer plays a part when they ask for news of the outside world, and they discuss with interest and surprising perception national domestic issues or even the international situation.

In the meeting room at Baker Lake is symbolized the really important changes that are coming to the lives of our Eskimo citizens. It is the emergence of the Eskimos themselves as the Innuit - - The Men. Not just The Men, when they escape from the confusion of white settlement back to their own camp, but The Men in the new Arctic whose future may depend upon them.

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